# AN EXAMINATION OF THEME IN THE NOVELS AND SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

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## PREFACE

My interest in the fiction of Stephen Vincent Benet combines a long-standing curiosity about the writer with an older interest in the novel and short story. When I learned that most of the scholarship on Benet had been devoted to his poetry, the study of his fiction became an even more challenging task.

In four chapters, this thesis attempts to survey a significant portion of Benet's fiction, including five of his short stories and all of his novels. The early biographical chapter is an attempt to illuminate the man and to make meaningful much of the subject matter the reader will encounter in the novels and short stories. The two central chapters offer a synopsis and an analysis of theme for each selection so that the reader may see the author's treatment of theme in his work. The final chapter attempts to draw together the most important of the author's themes and to arrange them in an organized pattern.

For his help and guidance in the preparation of this thesis, I should like to thank my adviser, Dr. Cecil B. Williams. To Dr. Clinton C. Keeler, as second reader, to others of the graduate English faculty, and to Mr. Alton P. Juhlin for his help in securing much of the source material, I should like also to extend my appreciation.

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CHAPTER I

STEPHEN VINCENT BENET: A PROFILE

On an autumn afternoon in 1942, Stephen Vincent Benet was visiting an old college friend, playwright Philip Barry, at his home in East Hampton, Long Island. While the two men watched the sea, the conversation turned to epitaphs and to the need for appropriate designations on burial markers. When his friend announced that he had found one for Benet, the poet asked to hear it. "Even Stephen," was the reply. Benet admitted reluctantly to a fondness for the phrase but asked his companion to complete it.

> Even Stephen? He must go?
> Even Stephen. Even so.

"I like that too, but," Benet added, "it's sort of scary."[1]

To Barry and to many other Americans it was to prove a "scary" prospect, indeed. That this versatile writer, this loyal and apparently invulnerable American, could be taken at the peak of his artistic success had seemed an impossibility. For the government, which had counted heavily upon Benet to clarify and interpret for the American people the burning issues of World War II, the poet's death on March 14, 1943,[2] held a special loss. In Benet's passing there was a different significance for the young writers and poets who would no longer benefit from the tall,

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[1]Philip Barry, "As We Remember Him," Saturday Review of Literature, March 27, 1943, p. 8.

[2]John H. Nelson and Oscar Cargill, eds., Contemporary Trends: American Literature Since 1900 (New York, 1949), p. 1247.

lean man's friendly advice and judgment. To all Americans there was the loss of a very great talent--one of the most sensitive and fertile to appear in the growing American literary heritage.

And yet it was "Even so," as Philip Barry had predicted it must someday be for this fiery patriot who had made himself so much a part of American literature and life.

Patriotism and a clear understanding of the American world were natural to the Pennsylvania-born poet, however. Before his earliest enrollment at Yale University he had experienced important and formative years in Georgia and California, as well as in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he was born, on July 22nd, 1898.[3] Maturing alongside his father's collection of "Minus Poetry"--poetry which Colonel Benet assured his son had the poorest chance of survival--the youngster grew artistically aware as he developed physically.[4]

Benet's father, like his father before him, was a West Point graduate.[5] "The only West Pointer who ever knew the main body of Elizabethan lyric poetry by heart,"[6] he was assigned to military posts scattered across the country, locating during the boy's childhood in both the bay area of San Francisco and Augusta, Georgia.[7] The Colonel had a

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[3]Ibid.

[4]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," Saturday Review of Literature, November 15, 1941, p. 3.

[5]Leonard Bacon, "Stephen Vincent Benet," Saturday Review of Literature, X (1934), 608.

[6]Ibid.

[7]J. L. Davis, J. T. Frederick, and F. L. Mott, American Literature: An Anthology and Critical Survey, II (New York, 1949), p. 874.

good sense of humor, an eager interest in the world about him, and a steady enthusiasm for mint juleps.[8] About poetry he was intense, and this special vigor was soon communicated to Stephen Vincent and to his brother and sister, William Rose and Laura, both later poets themselves.[9] Named for his maternal grandfather, Stephen Vincent Anastasius, the infant was nick-named "Tibbie" at an early age and when barely older, was found in the middle of his nursery floor "with a book upside down in his lap, reading aloud, although he had not yet learned to read."[10] Benet's eyesight did not always remain so strong, however; by the time he was in grammar school he had developed a serious nearsightedness which demanded correction all through his life.[11] He was never again without glasses. This partial handicap seemed not to impair his creative output, and may, in fact, have contributed to what his brother describes as the child's "interior life of the mind."[12]

If his eyesight was bad, his general physical condition was certainly not much better. Benet was a frail and lanky youth, unable to compete in the normal boy's games and athletic romps.[13] Horseback riding with his father and brother appears to have been his substitution, and to this all the men of the army family devoted themselves enthusiastic-

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[8]Bacon, p. 608.

[9]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 3.

[10]Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[11]Ibid., p. 4.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

ally.[14] Riding briskly through the hills of Georgia and California, young Benet was able to embrace many youthful interests--in history and battles and poetry, and the many separate ingredients which were later to combine in John Brown's Body.

Benet's reading during these early years was no less diverse. In addition to history books and his grandfather's texts for the United States Army, the youngster enjoyed the work of an American humorist who signed himself "M. Quad." Benet also had a fondness for Peck's Bad Boy--particularly the scene in which the child feeds his father rubber hose as spaghetti--an imaginative triumph, Stephen Vincent maintained.[15] Howard Pyle's Men of Iron and William Morris's poetry and prose were important influences on the schoolchild;[16] the latter was for some time Benet's favorite writer, and it is likely that much of the boy's later ability to deal so clearly and imaginatively with past American history was a result of his early appreciation of that Englishman and his careful treatment of historic detail. Other lasting literary contacts made by the Benet youth were with the works of Gilbert K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, and Alfred Noyes.[17] Louis Untermeyer finds in the early poetry of Benet, "more than a trace of Alfred Noyes."[18] William Rose Benet describes his brother's passion for the art of poetry as a "bright valor

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]William R. Benet and Norman H. Pearson, The Oxford Anthology of American Literature (New York, 1941), p. 1680.

[18]Louis Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900 (New York, 1923), p. 242.

in his blood,"[19] even at an early age. "There has always been in my brother's work delight in legend, delight in the tapestry, though his manner of presentation seems to me to take from it any taint of the mustiness of libraries."[20]

At ten, Stephen Vincent Benet was enrolled at the Hitchcock Military Academy in California.[21] It was here that the child who for so long had lived introspectively learned that the world is not always a friendly one to those who are sensitive and imaginative--particularly if they refuse to conform to accepted patterns of behavior.[22] There is a strange paradox in the elder Benet who, while a regular army soldier, was, nevertheless, a keen critic of poetry and a warm friend to the arts. The two roles are, of course, not necessarily exclusive ones, but the military image Colonel Benet managed to present to his family did little to prepare the ten-year-old for the bullying he would receive at the hands of the neophyte soldiers with whom he was forced to live at the California school. His own home had managed to combine the military with the literary life and to do so effectively and with cheer. At Hitchcock, however, there was little encouragement of the child's poetic promise, and much persecution by the "Nazi-minded"[23]--that animal element which tries to punish through brutality what it cannot understand intel-

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[19]William R. Benet, "Round About Parnassus," Saturday Review of Literature, VII (1930), 491.

[20]Ibid.

[21]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 4.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

lectually, and the very order of man which Stephen Vincent Benet was later to oppose with such passion and conviction.

Despite the rugged treatment by his academy fellows, the child rejected the comfort of self-pity.[24] Even more surprising, perhaps, was his refusal to comply with his young peers' pressure to conform. According to his brother, the boy lived as he wished, and despite the cruel coercion brought against him by his schoolmates, he did not consider the rewards of social compliance. Much of the melancholy of this time in the young poet's life is recorded in his warm and sympathetic tribute to "Shelley at Eton," and in "Going Back to School."[25] The child's "interior life of the mind" was finding a continued existence at the military school.

Then his father was transferred to the romantic and colorful city of Augusta. Falling quickly into sympathy with the world around him, Benet took eagerly to the history and color of the ante-bellum community. Sultry southern nights spent on the Augusta porch of the Benet family home stimulated an already increasing poetic sensitivity and a sharpening sense of humor in the child. It was here, too, that father and youngest son reviewed history and the first American battles about which Colonel Benet's father had written many army texts.[26] The ordnance post commanded by the boy's father was one which had "forgotten old wars and foreseen no new ones,"[27] and the army officer had increased time to spend with his family. As he was later to do with socialism and other

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Bacon, p. 608

issues, Stephen Vincent developed a burning passion for the South,[28] for the ordeal of its people during the Civil War and the difficulty which faced them as they tried to recover. Also as with socialism, his almost-exaggerated allegiance to the South proved to be a temporary condition--passionate and unyielding while it lasted, but tempered with increased age and maturity. There is little doubt, though, that the early inspiration for his best known work belongs to the southern city of Augusta with its wide streets and arched trees and its long Confederate history.

At seventeen, Stephen Vincent Benet entered Yale University. Again he refused to conform to the customary college freshman's behavior.[29] When a Yale lecturer dwelt shrewishly on the personal life of a British poet, Benet's objection was made in verse--a thorough reprimand of the academic speaker for his personal intrusion into the poet's life and his accompanying failure to weigh and evaluate the art of the famous writer.[30] Revolts like this ran deep with Benet. They continued through his life, and were always based clearly on principle--against the suppression of some individual liberty or freedom or the transgression of a person's privacy. This loyalty to principle and justice did much to win for the young college man a great popularity on the campus. "By graduation," John Berdan recalls, "he was one of the most admired men in his class."[31]

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[28]William R. Benet, "Round About Parnassus," p. 491.

[29]John Berdan, "As We Remember Him," Saturday Review of Literature, March 27, 1943, p. 9.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

Admired personally, he was also respected for his literary ability, which during his first college years began to make itself apparent. Five Men and Pompey, his first volume of poetry, was published when he entered the university in 1915. Soon after, he was made editor of the Yale literary Magazine, The Lit, and counted among his friends people like Archibald MacLeish, Philip Barry, and Thornton Wilder.[32] In his junior year the young poet received the Yale University Poetry Prize for "The Drug Shop, or Endymion in Edmonstoun," a poem about John Keats.[33] Archibald MacLeish recalls that Benet never became a part of a literary group or movement, either during or after his college years. His talent was, indeed, too diverse for such a restriction, and although he was invariably kind, MacLeish believes the young poet developed a contempt for such movements and coteries, which he did not abandon even in later years.[34]

The undergraduate Benet is pictured by Louis Bacon as a "humorous, romantic young man, his mind on fire from history and poetry."[35] It is not surprising that the poet watched European developments with interest, and that in his junior year he enlisted in the United States Army. This connection lasted only days, however; Benet's visual difficulty was detected at once, and he was given an immediate discharge. Wanting to make his contribution to the American effort in World War I, he refused to

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[32]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 22.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Archibald MacLeish, "As We Remember Him," Saturday Review of Literature, March 27, 1943, p. 7.

[35]Bacon, p. 608.

return to New Haven, the site from which so many of his college friends had departed for foreign soils. Instead, he joined the State Department as a clerk and was soon assigned to the Office of the Counselor. During these months, Benet shared his residence with John Franklin Carter, later a well known political writer.[36]

After the war he returned to Yale to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree, and to see his second book of poems, Young Adventure, published by the Yale University Press, with which he was later to have a lasting connection as editor of the "Yale Series of Younger Poets." Upon graduation in 1919, Benet accepted a job with the Charles W. Hoyt "Planned Advertising" agency in New York.[37] For the Hoyt enterprise the young poet wrote advertising copy at what must have been a tiring pace. William Rose Benet recalls his brother's affiliation with the advertising agency as "the only business office in which, to my knowledge, he has ever labored."[38] Discouraged with his brief business encounter, the Yale graduate became the Yale graduate student, returning to his alma mater to work for his Master's Degree, awarded in 1920.[39]

By this time, the young poet had been given wide recognition on the campus, and it was surprising only to a few when the Yale graduate school accepted his third collection of poetry, Heavens and Earth, in lieu of the conventional master's thesis.[40] Dean Wilbur Cross, then

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[36]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 22.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Fred B. Millett, Contemporary American Authors (New York, 1940), p. 246.

[40]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 22.

head of the graduate school, proved to be accurate in his judgment of Benet's volume: Heavens and Earth was in 1920 co-recipient of the Poetry Society Prize for that year, along with Sandburg's Smoke and Steel.[41] The objects of Benet's poetic skill in this volume reflect the young man's wide excitement with life: in Heavens and Earth he writes mainly of his New York City experiences--lunch-time on Broadway; morning on Thirty-second Street; strikers along Manhattan's lower Fifth Avenue; and, significantly, the poet's thoughts and feelings while earning his American advertising paycheck.

After he had completed his Master's degree, Benet spent the entire summer writing the first of his five novels, The Beginning of Wisdom.[42] His hand at prose proved as deft as his poetic marksmanship, and this first novel tells the beautiful and painful story of young love, "which, somehow, in its very vagueness and glamour, seems possessed of so much more essential tragedy than the loves of the mature."[43] Later he would write other novels, but none would ever again capture the same spirit of youth and the threat of impending age.

When he had finished his first novel, Benet went to France, where he studied at the Sorbonne. He was enthusiastic about France and maintained this feeling for the country, revealed in much of his poetry and fiction, throughout his life. While in Paris, according to his older brother, he managed to read a good deal, and to find some time for the

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[41] Untermeyer, p. 243.

[42] William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 22.

[43] William R. Benet, "Round About Parnassus," p. 491.

traditional French indulgence, drinking.[44] It was also in Paris that Benet met the girl who was to become his bride. Rosemary Carr had come to France's largest city from Chicago as a writer for the Paris edition of the Chicago Tribune and for the London Daily Mail. They returned to the United States and were married in Chicago in 1921, just after Benet completed his second novel, Young People's Pride, dedicated with a poem to his future wife.[45]

The serialization rights of his new novel sold to Harper's Bazaar, the couple went back to Paris. Their stay was not long, however, for Benet had a third novel burning within him, and the new Mrs. Benet returned with her husband to New York City, where she could await its completion by him. The result of this effort was Jean Huguenot, and its good fortune was sufficient to encourage Benet to challenge the magazines as a writer of short stories. This he did with considerable success for several years. Finally, at the birth of their daughter--the first of their three children--the short story writer felt himself lacking in ideas for stories and receiving too little satisfaction from many he had published.[46]

He had earlier submitted to the Guggenheim Foundation his plan for a long narrative poem about the Civil War, and in 1926, a grant from that organization was issued him. He had decided to turn in earnest to poetry, and so chose to return to Paris for the poem's creation. There the growing Benet family made its home, while the head of the house made frequent

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[44] Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 22.

[45] Ibid., p. 23.

[46] Ibid.

trips to a large Paris library where research for the poem was begun. John Brown's Body was an immediate success and earned for its author, in addition to royalty rights and the 1928 Pulitzer Prize award, the distinction of being one of the most widely-read American poets in history. When asked about his success with the long narrative poem, Benet replied that he felt as though "he had given birth to a grand piano."[47]

Soon after his triumph with the poem, both his commercial market value and his creative spirit seemed to soar, and the following years were among his most productive in both poetry and prose.

In 1930, the Benets moved to New York City from Rhode Island, where they had made their home since their return, two years earlier, from Europe. The following decade was a busy one, for not only was the writer's work sought with increasing demand, but his advice and literary judgment held a high premium, too. In 1932, he was the recipient of the Shelley Memorial Award.[48] In 1933, he received the Roosevelt Medal for his contribution to American letters, and he thus became, with the exception of Lindbergh, the youngest person to receive that award for achievement in American life.[49] The publication of his fifth and final novel, James Shore's Daughter, in 1934, stirred new critical interest, and revealed the poet's hand in its careful and delicate treatment of the hero who found himself living between two worlds--his native France and the broad reaches of the new and thrilling America.

"The Devil and Daniel Webster," one of Benet's most famous short

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[47]Ibid.

[48]Millett, p. 246.

[49]Ibid.

stories, was made into a one act play, a short opera, and a successful Hollywood motion picture. Burning City, a new collection of poetry, aroused many with its famous indictment of the world's dictators and its warning to free men everywhere. Fortune magazine featured on its cover, "The Story of the United Press as told by Stephen Vincent Benet," while the airwaves carried the author's new radio play, "The Headless Horseman," based upon Washington Irving's "A Legend of Sleepy Hollow," with music by Douglas Moore.[50]

Benet's was a busy life in the late 1930's. Thirteen O' Clock, Stories of Several Worlds, was published in 1937, followed the next year by Johnny Pye and the Fool Killer. He had already received the Nation's poetry award twice, and the O. Henry Memorial Awards Short Story prize for "The Devil and Daniel Webster."[51] He was elected to membership in the Academy of Arts and Letters, and was vice-president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.[52] He was busy reviewing fiction for the Saturday Review of Literature, which his brother had helped establish, and even found time to complete a film scenario for the Rural Electrification Administration, called "Power and the Land."[53] He became an editor of the "Rivers of America" series and was, until his death, the editor of the "Yale Series of Younger Poets." In this position he is most often remembered. The works of Paul Engle, Joy Davidman, Muriel Rukeyser

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[50]Ibid., p. 247.

[51]William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 24.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., p. 25.

and others were brought to public attention through his effort and discriminating taste.[54] When he felt that rejection might be in a poet's best interest, he never executed it without generous encouragement and sincere understanding. When Benet advised Muriel Rukeyser that her poetry might be more suitably published by a larger, commercial publishing house, he personally contacted the publishers. After repeated failures, he agreed to publish her book of poems at Yale rather than allow it to remain unpublished.[55] In the literary world, Benet's kindnesses became legend.

His courage, like his kindness, was a legend, too. His unyielding respect for principle, so apparent during his school days, he never compromised. He is said to have departed abruptly from a room in which "an absent friend had been unfairly criticized."[56] John Farrar remembers that "at a point where the things he believed were attacked, his eyes could blaze and the quiet voice become loud with scorn and invective."[57]

This magnificent sense of injustice compelled Benet to warn against the growing threat of world domination, for above all, he hated dictatorships and political tyranny. His words were among the first from an American literary man to recognize the growing danger in Europe.[58] In "The

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[54] Ibid., p. 24.

[55] Muriel Rukeyser, "As We Remember Him," Saturday Review of Literature, March 27, 1943, p. 11.

[56] John Farrar, "As We Remember Him," Saturday Review of Literature, March 27, 1943, p. 10.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature (New York, 1942), p. 116.

Blood of the Martyrs" and "Into Egypt," he reveals his sympathy for the oppressed peoples of the world. So effective was his great warning that the government enlisted his services in the Office of War Information after Pearl Harbor. Most of Benet's official writing during the war was for radio, and the airwaves shook with his indignation. Radio plays like "Dear Adolf," "They Burned the Books," "The Undefended Border," and "Your Army" were regular events in the American home, doing much to explain a world at war to the armchair listener. Benet's prayer, "To the Century of Modern Man," still stands as one of man's most simple and beautiful utterances in the cause of peace. The poet's tributes to Franklin Delano Roosevelt are notable for their literary quality.

Rosemary Benet was not idle during her married years. In addition to caring for the three children born to her and her husband, she maintained a regular interest in literature, translating much of Colette from the original, contributing frequent book reviews to periodicals, and acting as a judge of children's stories. She and her husband collaborated on portraits of other writers for Irita Van Doren's Books.[59]

Stephen Vincent Benet had told his wife he would "not live to be old."[60] He had suffered many years from arthritis, but his fatal heart attack on March 14, 1943, came swiftly and as a shock to those around him.[61] At his death he was working on a new epic poem to be called Western Star, the completed portion of which was published in 1943. He had

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[59] William R. Benet, "My Brother Steve," p. 25.

[60] Rosemary Benet, "Introduction," The Last Circle, Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1946), p. vii.

[61] Ibid.

long planned "a will of intangible things. . .to speak for him after he died,"[62] but this, too, was never completed; evidently he did not expect to die so soon.[63] In death, Stephen Vincent Benet fulfilled a prophecy to his wife. In life, however, was his human promise fulfilled--in the gentle, yet passionate descriptions of the wide American continent and its people; in his fiery hatred of those who would oppose freedom and individual rights. For America, and for free people everywhere, his voice had been and would continue an eloquent one.

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[62] Ibid., p. viii.

[63] Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

## THEME IN THE NOVELS OF STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

Probably no component of the novel is as important as theme. In his lifetime, Stephen Vincent Benet produced five novels over a period of fourteen years, and those qualities which will endure in the writer's fiction--a love of American myth and legend, a remarkable ability to capture regional characteristics, to mention but two--are dependent for their existence on theme. Without theme, Johnny Pye's flight from the Fool Killer would be meaningless for today's reader, and the triumph of a young slave boy over his traditional masters would be a hollow victory. Action and plot, necessary ingredients in any work of fiction, are without theme sterile surfaces of only topical interest. It is theme which brings to a successful literary work the attention of later generations, placing that work in the mainstream of a national culture. Subject matter, plot, and setting, important elements in the novel, are handmaidens of theme.

In his five novels, Benet tells many stories, all set in different locales. The action of *Spanish Bayonet* is laid in the eighteenth century Florida jungle; much of *James Shore's Daughter* takes place in Europe, as does the climactic part of *Jean Huguenot*. If the student of American literature is to assign the novelist his proper place in the national literary current, he must determine the writer's thematic concern, independent of plot and setting.

In the following pages, each of Benet's novels will be summarized

and analyzed, with emphasis on its theme.

The Beginning of Wisdom[1]

In his first novel, Stephen Vincent Benet brings a young man's insight to bear on an adult world. The author's theme in this earliest fictional attempt is the discovery by a young man of himself, and his growth to an enlarged understanding of the world about him. The often disappointing by-products of this increased understanding provide Benet with an opportunity to portray the failure of generations to communicate with each other, a young person's sense of social injustice, and the preparation of youth for lasting love.

When young Philip Sellaby enters Yale University in 1912, he has been prepared for the academic rigors by his secondary schooling at a California military academy. Through this encounter, he has developed an intense dislike for the disciplined educational procedure and militarily controlled scholarship. At Yale, Phil sees the fulfillment of his dream: an environment in which the individual is encouraged to discover his own identity in relation to the world around him. The boy takes immediate advantage of his eastern opportunity--writing poetry for the Yale literary magazine, studying the classics, and spending the late hours of the night in philosophic debates with his friends and classmates.

During the summers he rejoins his family in California, where Philip Sellaby, Sr., approaching middle age, is a prospering business man. At each visit, young Phil finds Sylvia Persent, daughter of a family friend, more interesting and attractive.

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[1]Stephen Vincent Benet, The Beginning of Wisdom (New York, 1921).

When, during his senior year at college, Phil meets Milly Stillman, the New Haven daughter of a declining alcoholic dentist, he abandons his academic application to become acquainted with her. As a prominent campus figure, Phil is known as a leader in the arts, an active fraternity man, and a capable student. As his infatuation with the girl deepens, his campus friends see less of him.

For many months the couple are able to restrain their physical desires, but one early spring evening their resistance weakens and they lose their sexual innocence. Although Milly has no regrets about the night, Phil feels himself her betrayer. Shortly after, in the throes of their young love, the two marry and spend a brief honeymoon week end in New York. Once back in New Haven, Phil keeps their marriage a secret from his friends and the officials of Yale college, whose policy is against undergraduate marriage. Confused and unable to explain his elopement to his family, the boy declines in his academic work. Only a month after their marriage, Milly is stricken with double pneumonia and dies after a week's illness. Phil feels that "everything...had gone out like the flame of a match."[2] As he attempts to recover from the emotional strain of the preceding few months, he is informed by the college administration that his academic laxity will prevent his graduation.

With several of his college friends, Phil determines to enlist in the Canadian Royal Flying Corps, and he joins his companions in a preliminary physical examination which discloses that he has active tuber-

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[2]Ibid., p. 145.

culosis, for which he is advised to go to Arizona. Near the breaking point, he writes a desperate letter to his family in California, revealing his tragic marriage, his failure to graduate, and his physical condition. The Sellabys arrange to join their son briefly in Frickett Junction, Arizona--"a sand-pitted half-mile of frame shacks and tents... between a lot of tall, cold mountains."[3] Before he and his wife leave, Philip, Sr., helps his son locate a job with Frickett Junction's copper mining industry. Working ten and twelve hours daily, Phil is too exhausted to read or write during the week, and cherishes Sundays for the freedom and opportunity for creative work which they provide.

When the entire population of the raw little mining camp chooses sides in a labor-management dispute, the boy's sympathies are with his fellow laborers, most of whom belong to the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World. One day an angry mob of the community's citizens, led by the town's most emotional orators, forces the union's members and sympathizers to board a train for New Mexico. After an agonizing several days under guard aboard the barren freight cars, Phil and the other men are rescued by the United States Army, which, having been notified of the violation of the men's rights, arranges a temporary campsite to feed and clothe the displaced workers.

When the boy hears that he is scheduled to undergo an army physical examination to determine his eligibility for service in the World War, he returns secretly to Frickett Junction, where the examining doctor assures him that while his lung condition will not pass the army requirements, he has never had tuberculosis. Elated, he leaves the Arizona town at once

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[3]Ibid., p. 155.

for his family home in California. Once there, however, he is disappointed by the attitude held toward him by his father, who expects his son to prove his character by military service in the war. The boy is haunted also by the publicity given him by the California newspapers, which have traced his participation in the Southwestern labor dispute. Frustrated and angry, he leaves home on foot for the southern part of the state, where, after trying several temporary jobs, he becomes an "extra" on a large movie lot. The studio's director is impressed by the boy's grace and confidence on the silent screen and stars him in a picture. The film is successful and the young man at once becomes a celebrity. After he makes several other pictures, he is revisited by his earlier shame at his civilian status in a warring world. This feeling of guilt is increased by his brief reunion with Sylvia Persent, now a canteen worker preparing to go abroad. When he leaves Sylvia, he determines to undergo surgery in the hope of correcting his lung condition.

The success of his operation enables the boy to enlist in the army after a period of several months. As he nears the completion of his basic training, the armistice is signaled; Phil and the men in his company are dejected at not having fought in the war. When he is discharged, Phil returns to his home, finding a somewhat more sympathetic father than he left, and a new, more mature Sylvis.

Together he and the girl reconstruct the experiences of their past few years and find in them a pattern of growth and maturity. Sylvia, who is as charming as in childhood, has taken on the added luster of maturity; she has met the larger world and grown to understand herself through the experience.

Phil, whose life and wanderings have transported him to strange in-

tellectual and emotional lands, has satisfied his explorer's search, returning to his home more confident and knowing, with a clearer distinction between the important and unimportant in human experience. Although they are happy, the wedding they plan is not one of two ordinary young people, but of two who in experience and discovery have left youth behind.

Through an examination of the novel, the author's theme becomes clear: the growth and eventual emergence of a young man as a sensitive and mature member of the society in which he lives. The beginning of true wisdom was, however, a late one for Philip Sellaby. His experiences

> ...seemed to him an education of body and mind...He could imagine no better post-graduate work with...biting preparation for experience... than that which he had had. His mind was one of those that are sure to begin in facile brilliance, a kind of false dawn of the intellect, but must come to any true growth late...[4]

Through his experiences, the boy had developed an understanding of his relationship to his family and theirs to him; a larger, more acute social conscience; and a full realization of mature love.

The Arizona mining camp had proved for the young Yale man an important lesson in economics. The management of the copper-mining industry expected the boy 's allegiance to its capitalistic cause, and the immigrant workers with whom he labored were at first reticent to accept Phil's friendship. Abandoning the inherited economic beliefs held by his family and many of his Yale acquaintances, Phil had strengthened his respect for himself by standing with his laboring friends in the time of their persecution.

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[4]Ibid., p. 315.

His gradual separation from his father had become for Phil a frustrating and insoluble problem. Not until Phil had made his own life in the midst of a challenging intellectual community did the boy question his past loyalty to Sellaby family convictions. His father's rejection of him after Phil's return from Arizona drew the fine threads of the two Sellabys' differing experiences to a harsh and abrupt climax. Mr. Sellaby was disappointed in the adherence of his son to the socialist-union movement in Arizona--a participation which had publicly embarrassed the older man and for which, in his judgment, there was no justification. Phil likewise was impatient with his father's reaction. Expecting a greater loyalty from his father, the boy readily blamed him for his dogmatic opinions. In this experience he had seen and understood the failure of communication between generations.

Milly Stillman was for the Yale senior the embodiment of his new intellectual discovery: a non-intellectual herself, Milly met life freshly, with great warmth and exuberance. While Phil read, Milly was given to dancing; Phil wrote poetry and Milly sought nature and the outdoors for her discovery; Phil's life of the mind was, in Milly, a life of action and activity. Opposites, they were attracted to each other, each respecting and somewhat envying the other's approach to life. Because neither of them had been in love before, their romance was passionate, adventurous, and delicate in its youthfulness--and there hung over it the threat of the eventual end which, had it not come in Milly's death, might well have materialized in a later maturity.

Phil's return to Sylvia, his childhood friend, represented for him a wise, though somewhat sad knowledge. His love for the California girl was mature and wise, resting as it did on the experience which had

shaped his world since his departure from home. That his feeling for Sylvia was not the singular passion he had held for Milly was beyond his control. Having lived through youthful love, he could no longer return to it; and while his later romance had benefited from his past life, it had also suffered an inevitable loss. For Phil, the beginning of wisdom had been the end of youth.

## Young People's Pride[5]

In Young People's Pride, Stephen Vincent Benet turns his attention to the theme of love and the extent to which people of widely varying ages are prepared to sacrifice their pride for it.

Oliver Crowe and Ted Billett, young men in their middle twenties, are both veterans of World War I, both Yale graduates, and both are facing the obstacles imposed by a socially-created pride. Oliver, in love with a young St. Louis girl, is unable to provide for her financially. Despite a certain limited success with a youthful book of poetry, he has not been able to follow this with publication as rewarding--either artistically or commercially. To earn more money, he accepts a position with an advertising agency, for which he completes several pieces of work before facing total evaporation of his creative drive. Unable to produce advertising copy for his employer, the young man broods and laments the economic circumstances which separate him and Nancy Ellicott, but is powerless to extricate himself from his creative lapse.

Ted Billett has no such problems. Economically secure, he is in love with Elinor Piper, but is unwilling to divulge his feeling to her because of his violation of conventional sexual morality while serving

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[5]Benet, Young People's Pride (New York, 1922).

in France during the World War. To further strain Ted's love for Elinor, both he and Oliver are friends and frequent house guests of the girl's brother , Peter. To offer marriage and a respectable home to the charming and innocent Elinor seems to Ted an impossibility. He regrets his moral weakness while abroad and feels that even if the girl he loves would be able to overlook it--a very doubtful supposition--he could not, in good conscience, take her for his bride.

Oliver makes a hurried trip to visit his fiancée in St. Louis and discovers that while her patience has not expired, her interest in her life at home has. Encouraged by her parents, she accepts a position as an artist with a woman's fashion magazine, which will eventually send her to Paris. Because he can offer her no hope of marriage, Oliver leaves the mid-western city resigned to life without her.

When he returns to the East, Oliver leaves his job and accepts his friend Peter's invitation to a week-end house party at the Pipers' Long Island estate. Despondent over his own situation, Oliver attempts to arrange at least for his friend Ted's marital future. He encourages Ted to propose to Elinor, which the young man eventually agrees to do, and Elinor accepts his proposal. In a fit of conscience, however, Ted reveals his overseas' promiscuity to his fiancee. Horrified and unable to forgive this moral lapse, Elinor withdraws her agreement to the marriage. Ted, now more desperate than ever, tells his friend of the encounter and of his accompanying despair. In this despair, he turns to an acquaintance made through Oliver's sister, a Mrs. Severance, whose designation as a married woman is a matter of strange curiosity to those who know her. Without a husband, this attractive "older" woman is assumed to be a widow, though the identity of her late husband is also in doubt. On an

earlier occasion Mrs. Severance has indicated her interest in the younger Ted, and he now seizes this opportunity to rendezvous at her Manhattan apartment, attempting to prove himself the immoral person he believes himself to be.

In the meantime, Oliver adopts a plan to reveal to Elinor the error of her romantic pride; when she asks him of his own approaching marriage to Nancy, he advises her that his and Nancy's engagement has been broken. Alarmed, Elinor questions him, and he replies that his war-time moral conduct had astonished and injured the pride of his fiancée--accounting for their break on grounds identical with those which caused Ted's and Elinor's discord. Elinor, misled by Oliver, is faced with her own proud reasoning in another. After a re-examination of their relationship, she writes a note to Ted, advising him of her better judgment, and asks Oliver to deliver it.

Intruding on the dinner Mrs. Severance had planned for Ted, Oliver apprehends the boy before the older woman has been able to complete her seduction. When he receives the note, Ted jubilantly agrees to return. Before he and Oliver are able to leave, there is a knock at the door, and Mrs. Severance asks them to conceal themselves in the kitchen. When a man's angry voice is heard, the two boys realize the intimate claim this stranger has on the older woman and are fearful that his suspicion of Mrs. Severance's loyalty has been aroused The boys soon recognize the man as Elinor's father, and when a revolver shot is heard, Ted insists upon revealing himself in the hope of giving aid. Oliver, who foresees scandal in a public disclosure of the evening, knocks Ted unconscious to prevent his entering the dramatic quarrel. When he recognizes Oliver, Mr. Piper is startled. Mrs. Severance, who has not been harmed by the

misdirected pistol shot, manages to explain to Mr. Piper's satisfaction her interest in and long acquaintance with the young Oliver.

The older man frankly acknowledges his role as Mrs. Severance's lover and, although he is humiliated, he does not ask for clemency from Oliver. Aware that the young boy's reporting of the event would threaten his business standing and his family life, Piper leaves the decision of disclosing his relationship with Mrs. Severance to Oliver Crowe and (unknowingly) his prospective son-in-law. After Mr. Piper's departure, the two young men agree that the shocking news should be withheld, at least for the immediate future.

Oliver lingers momentarily after Ted's departure at Mrs. Severance's request. When she reminds him that she could have had his young friend had she desired, Oliver is stricken with the frank and terrible knowledge of her strange charm. She chills him with her realization of the world, which, while holding a youthful mystery for him, he does not care to understand in Mrs. Severance's realistic and mature sense:

He decided that few conversations he had ever had, made him feel quite so inescapably, irritatingly young; that he saw to the last inch of exactitude just why Mr. Piper completely and Ted very nearly had fallen in love with Mrs. Severance; that she was one of the most remarkable individuals he had ever met; and that he hoped from the bottom of his heart he never, never saw her again.[6]

When Oliver returns to complete his party week end at the Piper home, he receives a call from his mother, who tells him that Nancy is waiting for him at his home. Greeting him warmly, Nancy admits the surrender of her pride, and the rejection of her family's outmoded beliefs about marriage. As the novel closes, the two newly-weds are sailing

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[6]Ibid., p. 279.

for Europe, where Oliver has obtained a job with the American Express Company through an old college friend. Nancy plans to assume the position she had been offered with the fashion magazine. Having sacrificed their pride, the couple are left en route to Europe.

Benet takes for his theme in his second novel youth's pride in refusing to accept love on any but its own terms and contrasts it with the willingness of middle age to pursue love and happiness at any cost. To carry out this theme, the author explores the romantic pursuits of four young people.

Separating Oliver Crowe and Nancy Ellicott was their stubborn refusal to admit that love and marriage could be anything which they had not previously expected. Nancy did not at first consider the prospect of marriage to Oliver until he was able to provide for her in a way which would sustain her inherited social values. Whether Oliver's acceptance of this same view had been due to Nancy's position, or whether he, too, had shared her belief about marriage's accompanying social and economic requirements is not made entirely clear. It is clear, however, that he had intended to live under these socially-imposed requirements until Nancy's change of heart, late in the novel, freed him from them.

Ted Billett and Elinor Piper fared somewhat better economically. Ted's problem was not one of provision. Instead, he had acted as his own judge, finding himself guilty of serious sexual immorality while serving overseas. In her refusal to marry him, he had permitted Elinor to be his executioner. Elinor reveals to the reader more actual understanding than she did to Ted, and it is doubtful that the boy's moral violations were her real concern. To sanction them too readily, however, was to risk a great many of her other convictions on love and marriage and

the large world of social custom--a risk she was not emotionally equipped to take.

Mr. Piper's affair with Mrs. Severance, the novel's "evil woman," had also entailed risk. The wealthy business man had in this extramarital excursion risked the loss of his social position, his wife and family, and his professional standing. To Mr. Piper in middle age this did not matter. The happiness he was able to extract from his illicit affair made any hazard worthwhile. Discovered in a passionate rage against his mistress by one of his son's closest friends, he did not ask for forgiveness, not did he request the consideration of secrecy from his son's companion.

Mrs. Severance and her lover had learned that life is not always what is hoped for. Middle-aged and mature, they were willing to accept their happiness on any terms. By the end of the novel, this lesson had made its first important impression on the two younger couples. Nancy Ellicott had realized that a further extension of her engagement to Oliver would serve no end except their separation. Oliver, in turn, had grown aware that the experience of life is large, more real and, at its best, more joyous than retaining a foolish and impractical illusion. Elinor Piper had learned the difference between the important and unimportant considerations in her desire to marry. Socially-imposed, her notion of purity had grown clearer to her--not a conviction she harbored on a personal basis, but one she had been taught to accept without examination. Elinor's eventual acceptance of him restored Ted's self-esteem. He had begun to see that his departure from the conventionally moral route was not an insurmountable threat to his future life.

Through the four young people's increased knowledge of life, Benet

is able to illustrate his theme of false pride and the compromise it must undergo if an individual is to find love.

### Jean Huguenot[7]

Fate's unpredictable treatment of the person who meets life bravely and with excitement is the theme in the first of Benet's two novels centered around strong and vigerous American heroines. That the author was concerned with the hazards met by the passionate individual in search of happiness and completion is clearly evidenced by the narrative action of the book.

At the age of seven, Jean Huguenot is as "hotly alive as a cub vixen."[8] The product of the marital union of two old Southern families, the Huguenots and the Newsomes, Jean is born into the world of St. Savier, Georgia, a medium-sized town whose people are busy making bitter adjustments to the post-civil war way of life. After her parents die, Jean is left to the care of her Aunt Eve. With few memories of her mother and father, the girl pieces together an imaginary heritage from old photographs left behind. As she matures, her enthusiasm for life becomes stronger and her will to live more and more urgent. Around the child are tokens of the rich Confederate past; in her daily life her sole encounter is with children bearing names like Flandrau, Crowl, Caszenove, Grandier, Popinal and Cotter--names which, in their local history, are as permanent and unchangeable as Jean believes her world to be. Assured of her social status and name, she feels adequate as she dominates St. Savier's group of young people with her poise, intelligence, and wild

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[7]Benet, Jean Huguenot (New York, 1923).

[8]Ibid., p. 6.

beauty. A restless adolescent, she allows her imagination to transport her not only to times past, but to the larger world of the present and future as well.

When young Ricky Cotter protests his love for Jean at a high school social event, she rejects him playfully. Ricky, more upset than the girl realizes, attempts a faltering suicide, marshaling St. Savier's parents and their children against the daring beauty whom they held responsible, revealing for the first time to Jean the power residing in her young charm and natural good looks. As stunned as others in the community at Ricky's attempted suicide, Jean is nevertheless forced to endure her own rejection at the hands of her youthful companions.

As time passes, the incident is grudgingly forgotten by all except a small group of the town's residents, and Jean, now more withdrawn than ever, meets a young northern hotel clerk who drifts into the community through a series of Bohemian escapades in the Middle-west. As an actor, poet, and philosopher, Gabriel Keene excites in the young girl her early passion for living, and the two rendezvous on a spring hillside. Keene falls in love with 18-year-old Jean, but refuses to make his life with her. Marriage to someone who holds such a power over him, he believes would prove an insufferable imposition, preventing the later artistic completion for which he hopes. He leaves St. Savier and Jean abruptly.

After Gabriel's departure and her Aunt Eve's death, Jean meets and marries an ambitious young college professor from New England. Shaw Ashley, vacationing in the Georgia town with his mother, is soon attracted to Jean Hugenot, now a ward of the Crowl family. Having lived under the protection of the Crowls for eight seemingly long months, Jean feels

herself "...a crow in a canary cage,"[9] an unwelcome addition to that family's home, despite their kindness in accepting her. When the young man proposes marriage to her, she sees his offer as an ideal means of escape from her predicament. After a brief honeymoon, the couple settle in Massachusetts, where Shaw teaches history at a small liberal arts college. Jean soon recognizes her husband's reckless, though calculating, lust for academic success, his great dependency on his mother, and his fear of honest passion and sensitivity. In Jean, Shaw believes he has found a wife who will accept the exchange of his social and economic security for her external participation in campus social functions. Aware of the pleasures of the flesh, Shaw indulges in them with a perfunctory, physical appetite. Much earlier, he had been frightened by the immense power generated by sexual attraction, and had viewed with fear the possibility of total surrender to it. He reacts to this threat by assigning sexual intimacy in marriage an insensitive animal role.

Jean learns of her pregnancy during the first year of their marriage. In the late period of her confinement, she observes in Shaw's mother an uneasiness which the girl ascribes to Mrs. Ashley's concern for her daughter-in-law's survival and the safety of her child. She learns, however, that the older woman is governed by no such benevolent concern: she is, instead, fearful that the girl will not encourage her husband to remarry in case she should not survive the delivery. The younger Mrs. Ashley assures her mother-in-law that her son will have no marriage restriction imposed upon him in the event that his wife is taken in childbirth. Fortunately, the girl survives the birth of her infant daughter,

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[9] Ibid., p. 113.

Eve, so named for Jean's late aunt and guardian.

After the birth of their daughter, Shaw and Jean see less of each other, and the years find them losing what few common interests they once shared. Shaw becomes absorbed in the production of academic papers which he hopes will assure him a full professorship at the small college. Jean surrenders her existence to young Eve, hoping to make for her a more rewarding, vital, and independent life than her mother had been able to achieve. At twenty-six and the mother of a seven-year old child, Jean accepts her role in an unhappy marriage, if somewhat sadly, nonetheless fully, as a condition of motherhood, which by now comsumes each hour of her life. When she learns of her second pregnancy, she knows she "must make things right if for the sake of children she submitted herself to pain and distaste--that was only just."[10] If she were able, she would communicate to her children the joy and promise, now for Jean long-abandoned, of living and experiencing and discovering one's own place in life: "Something must give her the power to transmit to others the action, the buried voice, that cried in her so for fulfillment, the ache for richness and splendor."[11] One night in the late weeks of her confinement, she detects in Eve a threatening temperature. Jean pleads with her husband to drive into the nearby village for the doctor. Shaw, lost in his scholarly labor, advises her to wait until morning, despite Jean's protests that their daughter is seriously ill. When he makes his final refusal, Jean drives the car into the village through the New England snow; she returns with the doctor, who diagnoses Eve's illness as diph-

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[10]Ibid., p. 163.

[11]Ibid.

theria. Emotionally and physically exhausted, Jean has also become ill, losing her second child through miscarriage and shortly thereafter her first, who dies of the dread children's disease.

After her recovery, Jean is bereft of purpose in her life. She realizes the absurdity of continuing her marriage to Shaw, but is too stunned and lifeless to explore a suitable method of ending it. When in 1912 Shaw travels to Europe to complete research for a book he is writing, Jean accompanies him. Empty of feeling for Shaw or for any remaining part of her existence, she is frequently left alone while her husband explores the libraries of Spain. There she meets Hugues Parette, a French automobile racer, who captures her imagination and spirit in a way like Gabriel Keene, though Parette is much "more alive than Gabriel. He was more alive than anyone else...even in dancing with him she had felt a certain pitch of life go from him."[12] Intrigued by Parette, Jean nevertheless rejects his offer of a love affair. Carefully she considers her honor, her responsibility to her legal husband and the marriage trust she is keeping. Knowing that there is no trust remaining in their marriage--no longer a real bond to be broken--she recalls a childhood limerick:

> Here lies J. H. like a counterfeit penny.
> She kept her trust when there wasn't any.[13]

In a moment of mounting impatience, Jean reconsiders Hugues offer and decides to accompany him to Paris.

The following years are the happiest of her life. Hugues' passion for living and his devotion to his mistress provide for her the only in-

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[12] Ibid., p. 205.

[13] Ibid., p. 218.

gredients necessary. In contrast to Shaw's dedication to the dead past, Jean finds in her lover a will and spirit invincibly alive; she gives herself to him wholly and in "first ecstacy"[14]--a surrender and accompanying fulfillment she had been unable to experience with her husband. Unwilling to risk their relationship, she does not ask him to marry her when Shaw's divorce decree frees her. When at the beginning of the World War Hugues receives his induction notice, Jean takes a smaller apartment, managing to live on an annuity from her late aunt's estate, which provides the essentials. Her whole concern during these months is her occasional opportunity to be with Hugues when he is home on leave. She is elated when he asks her to marry him after the war. Later, however, her elation turns to sadness at the change she sees in her once-heroic lover. Increasingly bitter, Hugues has had sapped from him the very qualities which first endeared him to Jean. When home on leave, he drinks furiously and kisses her without passion. Less of his leave time is spent with Jean on successive opportunities and rumors of his infidelity reach her in Paris. These changes, however, do not affect the girl's feeling for him; she suffers and grows increasingly concerned for his safety and state of mind. On his final furlough, Hugues spends only several hours with Jean. When, two weeks later, she receives word of his death, she is stricken and numb:

> For the first time she could see no future ahead of her, but the mere continuance in spite of her of the functions of the body, the earth too stubborn to rot, the clay that must be carried about like a dead man's bones forever, til some causeless chance released the mind from the long burden. This time the stroke of grief was too blunt and crushing for stupor.[15]

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[14]Ibid., p. 226.

[15]Ibid., p. 245.

When a friend of Hugues brings her some of his personal belongings, she notices at once a letter addressed to her late lover from a small village in France. Reading it, Jean learns that Hugues' infidelity was a fact, and that his child is to be born to an uneducated peasant girl. She determines to provide for the child a better life than it could expect in France's squalid provinces. Unable to do more than live on her small income, and void of her artistic sensitivity, she turns, calculatingly, to prostitution, which will enable her to make and save money for Hugues's child--an infant she regards as her own. After more than a year as a prostitute, during which time she has contributed as an anonymous American to the child 's early life, Jean reaches her financial goal and brings her sacrifice to an end. Through a Paris attorney she receives letters from the boy's mother, suggesting the trust fund Jean has arranged be turned over to the child's mother. Increasingly concerned about the child's living conditions, Jean begins to question the woman's motives and therefore the care the boy is receiving. She plans to adopt the child, an undertaking which she readily accomplishes because of the poverty of the boy's home and his mother's desire to marry a local butcher who regards the child as an unpleasant reminder of the peasant girl's past.

Jean witnesses in the boy a delight with life and a physical appearance unmistakably Hugues'. Slowly she comes alive once more, planning the child's future, absorbed in the life they will share. As the novel ends, Jean and her adopted son are tossing a coin to determine whether their home will be in France or America. The story closes before theoutcome is revealed.

Jean Huguenot couples two major themes and makes of them the novel's

very existence. The theme of chance and the role chance plays in the life of a truly sensitive and artistic person is carefully treated. The war between the highly-spirited, adventurous individual and his solid, adjustable counterpart is explored as a separate theme. The two themes, however, by the end of the work, have become one--the plight of the passionate and adventurous individual who risks the hazards of fate to a degree greater than do those less passionately-inspired.

Even as a youngster, Jean Huguenot had been misunderstood by her contemporaries. Later she was resisted by her husband, who feared the loss of order and system in his life and who, aware of his lack of control of passion, had successfully managed to destroy in himself the potential for love and beauty. Chancing nothing, he gained nothing, nor was he hurt. Jean, conversely, had been hurt in each new encounter. Not only had she been smothered in her marriage, but she faced always the inevitable pain which resulted from her desire to give. The loss of their daughter could not for Shaw be the same loss Jean had endured, for in the child's conception she had given a part of her personality while Shaw had given only physically.

When Hugues was killed in the war, Jean faced the loss of the person to whom she had given herself completely. But had he lived she would still have endured the pain of his unfaithfulness.

"Chance, the blind landlord,"[16] as viewed by Benet, is responsible not only for the large devastating setbacks endured by Jean, but also for the smaller changes which led to these setbacks. Ricky Cotter's attempted suicide had stirred public disapproval of Jean at an early

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[16]Ibid., p. 159.

age, isolating her in a world ripe for Gabriel Keene's appearance; the death of Jean's aunt forced the girl to seek home and security, making her vulnerable to the first bachelor who came along; the death of her daughter and the loss of her unborn child emancipated the girl from the imprisonment her marriage and been; Shaw's journey abroad enabled her to renew her contact with the world of adventure and romance, through which she met Hugues Parette; Hugues' infidelity produced the child for which Jean sacrificed herself in prostitution. The victim of fate, Jean had not only been subjected to its final disappointments, but to its constant changes in the course of her life. Those who had risked less than Jean had not hazarded fate's brutality to this extent, nor had they achieved the same happiness, however ephemeral.

The novelist's theme in Jean Huguenot is the plight of the individual who approaches life aware of its beauties and the promise it offers of happiness and fulfillment. Benet's sympathy is with this person in his scorn for the secure and his hope of finding a better life on earth. Chance, the author holds, may permit this individual to find such a life, but not without exposing himself to a sadness his more secure contemporary does not risk.

## Spanish Bayonet[17]

In his shortest novel, Stephen Vincent Benet tells a story of America in the months before the Revolution as witnessed by a young colonist in the Florida Wilderness. Through historical action, the author brings into focus the theme of a young person's acknowledgment of his political and social loyalties. The moral responsibility of an individual to the dictates of his conscience, despite the accompanying violation of family tradition, is, therefore, a resulting theme.

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[17] Benet, Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1942), II, pp. 113-257.

Andrew Beard arrives on the Florida coast after a long voyage from New York, his family home and site of the Beard family's trading business. Greeted on the Southern peninsula by Dr. Hilary Gentian, the boy is sped to his host's large indigo plantation--deep in the Florida wilds--where an immigrant work force provides the labor. Andrew's father has agreed to the boy's employment at the plantation so that Andrew may gain information which will help his father decide his future indigo investment.

Dr. Gentian, in whose backwoods estate the young man lives, is a clever and erudite Englishman who has a reputation among his workers for harshness. Andrew sympathizes with the indentured labor force composed of Italians, Greeks, and Minorcans, and quickly establishes a friendship with Sebastian Zafortezas of the latter group.

After many months at the plantation, during which the young New Yorker has witnessed the cruelty of Mr. Cave, the estate's foreman, to the foreign laborers, Andrew becomes attracted to Dr. Gentian's only daughter, Sparta. Dr. Gentian agrees happily to the engagement of the young couple as a means to Andrew's father's money.

When the boy becomes ill, he is cared for by Sparta's body-servant, Caterina, who he learns, is being forced against her will to accept Dr. Gentian's amorous advances. During his convalescence, Andrew overhears a conversation between Mr. Cave and Sparta which reveals both their illicit relationship and their plan to assume control of the plantation with the help of the foreign labor force. In desperation, the boy attempts late that night to leave the plantation. His passage, however, is blocked by Dr. Gentian's study, in which the older man is speaking aloud to himself, making clear to Andrew, for the first time, the doctor's great

lust for power and for the total domination of his indigo farm and its employees. In the man's crazed raving, Andrew sees insanity:

He could see little, but no other form than the doctor's crossed the range of his vision. Then he realized that though the doctor's voice questioned and affirmed and at times even pleaded...there was never any reply.[18]

The doctor, learning that the boy has detected his motive and ambitions, imprisons Andrew in the plantation' crudely constructed dungeon, where he shares a cell with Sebastian, who, resisting Mr. Cave's cruelty, has made an unsuccessful appempt on the heavy foreman's life. Together, Andrew and the Minorcan youth plot to escape. With Caterina's assistance, they complete a near escape when the entire plantation erupts in civil rebellion. Sparta and Mr. Cave, having chosen this hour to unite the laborers in revolt against Dr. Gentian, unwittingly make possible the escape of the three young refugees and eventually the entire Minorcan work force. Ablaze with violence, the indigo plantation provides a battlefield for the three elements: Dr. Gentian, whose ruthless desire for a slave labor camp has lost him control of the plantation; Sparta and Mr. Cave who have incited the Greek and Italian workers to riot in an attempt to secure control of the plantation; and the Minorcan workers, who, having seen injustice on all sides, attempt to leave their sordid circumstances, altogether. Through this warring zone Andrew, Sebastian,and Caterina escape, though not until Caterina has suffered a rifle wound.

After they have joined the evacuated Minorcans in St. Augustine, the young Minorcan girl dies. Later, Andrew describes to the Governor

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[18]Ibid., p. 190.

of the colony the conditions at Dr. Gentian's planation. Joining Sebastian, he boards a ship bound for New York, deciding to take arms against the British in their attempt to suppress the colonists' demand for freedom.

Spanish Bayonet is principally an adventure story. While the growth of a young man to advanced maturity and the creation of his democratic awareness are important themes, the remarkable feature of the novel is its complex narrative structure. Heavy with plot, the book sacrifices emphasis on pure theme for action and suspense; artistic exploration for surprise. Despite this, the important subject of a boy's discovery of his political loyalties is an apparent theme in the work.

When he arrived at Dr. Gentian's plantation, Andrew was uncommitted to either side in the brewing discord between England and colonial America. By the end of the novel, having witnessed the corruption which the motherland's rule permitted, and having himself been subject to a personal tyranny, Andrew had chosen to join the revolutionaries.

Contributing importantly to the young man's decision was his firsthand knowledge of the cruelty endured by the immigrant workers at the Gentian plantation.

Unaware of the boy's changing loyalties, Mr. Gentian did not suspect Andrew's sympathy for the Minorcans and the other foreign laborers. To Gentian, it was inconceivable that a prospering New York businessman's son would identify himself with any but the ruling order.

One of the difficulties for Andrew in his decision to support the revolutionary cause was his father, the loss of whose older son to the same cause had greatly disappointed the older man. To abandon the Beard family tradition was to Andrew almost a denial of his blood's long Eng-

lish heritage. His final decision--the product of his firsthand view of conditions at the Gentian plantation--seemed to him somehow right. "We'll all have to get used to new ways,"[19] he declared as he departed to join the rallying American army.

James Shore's Daughter[20]

Written in early maturity, after four youthful novels, Stephen Vincent Benet's final novel is, in theme, his most complex. The exploitation of the American frontier by a newly powerful order of men and the relationship of Europe to its child, America, combine to provide themes for the author in his dramatization of an era in history now past.

After his father dies in Europe, Gareth Grant and his brother and sisters accompany Mrs. Grant to the children's native America, where they reside in New York. A writer of family travel books, Mrs. Grant is attracted to the prospering families of the East Coast. Ten-year-old Gareth, the story's narrator, meets Violet Shore, two years younger, whose early awareness of her father's power is derived from a juvenile knowledge of the man's wealth and social position, and the flourishing activities of the "Lucky Dollar" copper mine. "'I always get what I want. You see, my father's rich. He's the richest man in the world, I guess. So I always get what I want.'"[21] The two children become constant companions until Mrs. Grant and her family return to Europe.

Some years later, Gareth, living in Paris, re-meets the widowed James Shore and his daughter Violet, who are vacationing in Europe. Act-

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[19]Ibid., p. 256.

[20]Benet, James Shore's Daughter (New York, 1934).

[21]Ibid., p. 86.

ing as their guide to the famous French city, Gareth finds his fascination with Violet Shore renewing after the years of their separation and their growth to adulthood. The girl, recognizing her appeal to the displaced American, foresees the threat to her sense of power and family responsibility which a marriage to him would mean. Much earlier she had planned to marry Charles Morton, whose family money dated back to a time before the Shore's fortune, and offered a promise of complete social respectability to the new wealth acquired by Violet's family. Also, Violet feels a security in the knowledge that her suitor is, like her, a person of means. "'You see, we both have money, so we needn't be afraid of each other at all. You don't know what that's like, especially if you're a girl.'"[22]

Despite this, and despite her sense of family tradition and responsibility, the girl falls in love with Grant, who asks the elderly Mr. Shore for permission to marry her.

Promising the boy an opportunity to win his daughter's hand, the American businessman asks Gareth to prove his industry and business ability by taking a job in Germany. After his return from that country, the boy receives word from Violet that she is engaged to Charles Morton, revealing to Gareth James Shore's intention to separate the two, and the success of his plan.

At the same time he receives this news, Gareth learns that his brother, Carlo has suffered the hemorrhage which ultimately leads to his confinement in a tuberculosis sanatorium. Arranging for his brother's care, Gareth visits him often, encouraging him to write the novel he had

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[22]Ibid., p. 86.

been planning, helping him construct a life from his remaining years.

When Violet Shore returns again to Europe, twelve years have passed. Gareth Grant is a coming art dealer on the continent; Violet--Mrs. Charles Morton--is the mother of two small children; and James Shore, in old age, is seeking European medical help.

Gareth and Violet soon find in each other the key to an earlier time in their lives. When the relationship becomes a more serious one, they abandon themselves to the sexual fulfillment they had missed in youth.

In his knowledge of their relationship, Gareth knows,"We were made for each other, but not for each other and the lives we lived, each other and the desires we had."[23]

The death of Violet's father changes the mood of the couple. To Gareth, the strong man's passing has ended an American epoch; for his daughter, James Shore's death has been his only retreat from life, placing upon her a greater responsibility in the direction of the Shore energy and wealth.

Just before the outbreak of war on the Continent, Gareth meets and marries British-born Caroline Vane. After the armistice, the returning soldier finds the world a quite different one: his brother, whose only novel is posthumously acclaimed, has died in the Swiss sanatorium; his business partner has been the victim of German fire; and one of his sister's children has been a fatality in an enemy assault on England. Returning to his wife, the American-born European senses a lack of understanding in their marriage.

When he returns for business reasons to his native land, Gareth

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[23]Ibid., p. 127.

finds in it a disappointing change. No longer peopled with the same courageous men, the young country had surrendered the tough fibre in its history which had made it great.

> Something had won, and it was not even a principle or a fear. It belonged to the new, smooth faces--I thought of James Shore--I thought of the lucky prospectors...I wondered where the smooth faces had come from to supplant those faces of strong grey. They had roofed Park Avenue, they had put the trains underground.[24]

When he sees her again, Violet has just turned forty. The wife of a wealthy business heir, she has sacrificed her young beauty to the responsibility of the thick Shore blood: "She was very splendid, but she had conquered her beauty at last. The wildness of it was gone."[25]

To Gareth, Violet was sitting atop a crumbling empire, a ruler of those unworthy of her rule.

> ...she had conquered her city. But, even as she had conquered, the conquest itself dissolved, for she had come too late. James Shore would not come from the West again, and no one hand would rule New York.[26]

In Violet's children, as in all the others about him, Gareth Grant sees the effect of time on heredity, the strength and aggressiveness of each pioneer name thinning itself in every successive generation. There were even"...branches of the Junior League in almost every Western City."[27]

In reunion, Gareth and Violet see more clearly the inevitable outcome of their love, while recognizing love's certain involvement of them.

Resolving to mend his damaged marriage, Gareth brings his wife to

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[24] Ibid., p. 207.

[25] Ibid., p. 227.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p. 218.

America, where, in his mother's family home, the two begin a new life. Some years later, Gareth goes to California on business, making a quiet pilgrimage to the shrinking town of Gunflint in Colorado, locale of the earliest Shore conquest. Acting as his guide through the light mountain air, a young eastern executive shows him the mountain village's history. There Gareth Grant realizes the loss a young nation must endure when its pioneers have forged their lands and its frontiers have been met.

Operating at several different levels, James Shore's Daughter comprises two themes in a carefully woven narrative fabric. The most apparent theme in the novel is the personal recollection of the central figure. In his narration are the ingredients of universal experience: inheritance (for Gareth Grant an artistic legacy from his two expatriate parents), love (a compromise for the wandering art collector), and death (making itself known to Grant through the passing of his father, his brother, his business partner and elderly James Shore). The record of a man's experience is documented in the novel.

Below the narrative action, however, lies a separate theme--almost dream-like--of man's heroism matched against the physical universe, represented in the late nineteenth century by American soil.

Together these two currents form the substance of Stephen Vincent Benet's most ambitious prose narrative. As the work unfolds, the separate themes very nearly become the same. In Violet's and Gareth's unsuccessful love, there had been the hopelessness of a true union between Europe with its aesthetic awareness, and America, with her practical, boundless energy. In the relationship, admiration, a sense of mystery, and even love abounded; indeed, the partners regarded each other with a certain envy, but the union of the two cultural worlds could not take

place, just as Violet's and Gareth's union could never be recognized in wedlock.

Gareth Grant knew that in his artistic heritage, his was not the strength and power Violet Shore deserved:

[Hers] was a last, a passionate cry of that nature which should have been possessed by splendor and greatness and had only found men like Charles Morton and myself...I wondered how to tell her that her empire did not exist, that James Shore was dead.[28]

Violet, knowing she must endure an unfulfilled love, had consented to this sacrifice to sustain the responsibility she felt hers. But in doing so, she realized "...love's a very cruel thing. It frightens you--not to be yourself--to be part of someone else. There ought to be something besides that."[29] To surrender, however, to this urgent emotion was to Violet too great a loss--one which would in time weaken her dedication to the challenge of ruling.

Gareth realized that James Shore's breed of men had acted instead of contemplated, had built rather then designed. In his way, the copper magnate had known happiness.

"Or perhaps happiness isn't the word--it really isn't the word for a man like that. But he...fitted the place and the time. He was in the full stream of it, so to speak--and, well, it was all fantastic. Fantastic--extraordinary--rough."[30]

Before America would be ready to unite with its European antecedent, it had a great deal of building to do. Everywhere there were signs of this immense resolution.

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[28]Ibid., p. 242.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., p. 220.

It was this that James Shore and his successors had built--this superb and barbarous splendor. They had done it without intention and there was nothing like it in the world. It was beyond vulgarity, for it was beyond belief...a triumphal shaft pointed angrily at the sky...[31]

For Violet and Gareth, love had come too early. Had they been born at a later time in history--at a time when land had been settled and people provided for on the young American continent--life for them both might have held a different promise. As it happened, however, their worlds were as separate and unique as those of their two cultures, divided by the sea.

In the survey of the author's five novels, a number of themes have appeared--a youth's discovery of himself and of romantic love; the struggle of a passionate individual for love and meaning in life; the maturing of young people who learn that pride must be sacrificed to love; the personal commitment of a young person to a cause unpopular with his family; and the sacrifices which must accompany an individual's dedication to power and responsibility.

After the next chapter, which will be devoted to theme as Benet employed it in a number of his short stories, fuller examination of these individual themes and their interrelation will be made in the final chapter.

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[31] Ibid., pp. 204-205.

## CHAPTER III

## THEME IN THE SHORT STORIES

## OF STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

Much of Stephen Vincent Benet's popularity has resulted from his success with the short story. In setting and subject matter, the author's stories provide a rather clear stratification. Classified on the basis of these two elements, his stories divide themselves into three groups--those whose roots are in American history, legend, and folklore; those which live in the world of fantasy; and the author's narratives on contemporary social problems. It is true, of course, that some overlapping is visible; thus "The Devil and Daniel Webster" is a fantasy which embraces American history and legend.

Five of Benet's short stories will be analyzed for their significance in theme. One of these, the one already cited, combines fantasy with New England folklore to produce a commentary on American tradition; in its strong moral theme it goes beyond a national boundary to become universal. Another of the stories, "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing," fits clearly into the author's body of work on American history. In much the same way, "The Die-Hard" reveals a continuing interest in this nation's regional problems and their solutions. The remaining two selections concern themselves with a more recent America, as seen through the small town's provincial view in "Too Early Spring," and in the sophisticated outlook of "The Prodigal Children."

"The Devil and Daniel Webster"[1]

The theme of the author's widely read "The Devil and Daniel Webster" is man's indomitable will, which is bound to triumph in the end over any adversity. Through the defeat of the devil by Daniel Webster, Benet is able to illustrate an important theme in a story which fuses fantasy with historical legend.

Life was hard onthe border country of New Hampshire for farmer Jabez Stone; his land unproductive, he was unable to feed and clothe the Stone family. One day, unable to endure his plight any longer, farmer Stone detects a threatening cough in one of his plow horses; he regards this as the final stroke of bad luck he can withstand, and determines to change his lot at any price. Shortly after,the north country farmer offers to sell his soul to the devil.

When on the following day he is visited by a stranger, Jabez joins him in signing a pact--the farmer's soul for the exchange of seven years' improved fortune. When he is revisited by the stranger in his sixth year of the bargain, Stone tries to evade his approaching commitment to the devil. Because he sees no solution to his problem, the New Hampshire man seeks the help of Daniel Webster, who has never before refused a New Hampshire resident in distress. Agreeing to defend his new acquaintance, Webster returns to the Stone farmhouse.

When Webster can not persuade the devil to release Mr. Stone from his agreement, he demands a trial for his client. Claiming American descent, the devil agrees to the hearing in the best American tradition.

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[1]Stephen Vincent Benet, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1942), II, pp. 32-46.

Instantly he produces the jury for the trial:

...there was Walter Butler, the loyalist, who spread fire and horror through the Mohawk Valley in the times of the Revolution; and there was Simon Girty, the renegade, who saw white men burned at the stake and whooped with the Indians to see them burn...and cruel Governor Dale, who broke men on the wheel[2]

These and other figures in American history took their place in the jury box. Justice Hathorne--who had sat at the earlier Salem witch trials--presided.

After his highest oratory has failed to persuade the jurors, and after all of his court objections have been denied by the judge, Daniel Webster begins to swell with rage, resolving to win his case regardless of his method in doing so. Quickly, though, this feeling is dispelled, as the famous orator recognizes that his victory must be on the side of principle and integrity, if it is to be a victory at all.

Emotionally he addresses the jury:

... he began with the simple things that everybody's known and felt--the freshness of a fine morning when you're young and the taste of food when you're hungry, and the new day that's every day when you're a child...They were good things for any man. But without freedom, they sickened. And when he talked of those enslaved, and the sorrows of slavery, his voice got like a big bell. He talked of the early days of America and the men who had made those days...He admitted all the wrong that had ever been done. But he showed how, out of the wrong and the right, the suffering and the starvations, something new had come. And everybody had played a part in it, even the traitors.[3]

By the time he has rested his defense, Daniel Webster has the jury spellbound. The decision in Jabez Stone's favor is a tribute to his counsel's eloquent oratory and moral dedication.

Before he leaves, the devil insists upon looking into Webster's

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[2]Ibid., p. 40.

[3]Ibid., p. 42.

future, where he sees numerous defeats--the frustration of the orator's attempt to be president, the death of his sons in war, and finally his rejection at the hands of a misunderstanding public. To these prophecies, the strong New Englander reacts with resolution. He believes that if one's integrity is intact, "...it does not matter what men say..."[4]

For his theme, in what is probably his best known short story, Stephen Vincent Benet has chosen man's determination to prevail.

For Daniel Webster there had been no alternative to his defense of the weaker Jabez Stone. The farmer, in difficult times, could not be held responsible for the bargain which would improve his and his family's circumstance. That he had not been stronger did not mean he was less a man. "There was sadness in being a man, but it was a proud thing too... even in hell, if a man was a man, you'd know it."[5]

An important decision for the New England lawyer was his early recognition of his own weakness. When he considered the use of his enemy's tactics to win the devil's jury, Webster had come dangerously near joining the side of the enemy. Deciding in favor of standing alone on his own morality, he knew that even in defeat, he would not resemble his adversary.

Through this crucial move, Daniel Webster had insured his victory. Once his decision had been made, he had exceeded the reach of the devil's men, who found him untouchable in his world of private strength.

From this position of security, they were helpless under his assault. As he reminded them of the joys of living, the personal rewards

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[4]Ibid., p. 45.

[5]Ibid., p. 42.

in a dedication to honesty and integrity, the devil's hangmen were powerless to decide against him.

Later, when the devil had promised him a future of disappointment, Webster did the only thing he could, accepting his life with the quiet knowledge and security that he had lived it well and without moral compromise. Through this acceptance, Benet reinforces his central theme.

"Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing"[6]

The difficulty both in acquiring freedom and meeting the responsibility freedom implies furnishes the author his theme in "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing." He sketches this theme through the flight of a Negro youth from slavery.

Long ago, a young slave boy by the name of Cue watched his parents die on the deep south plantation which was his home. Left alone in the world, Cue feels lonesome as he works in the plantation blacksmith shop. Bothered by a recurring dream of freedom, the boy is helpless to make his vision come true until he consults Aunt Rachel--the oldest and wisest of the slave community. When she advises Cue to seek his freedom, she does so with the knowledge that the boy, unlike his father, who seldom looked beyond the boundaries of the plantation's Negro compound, is like his grandfather Shango--strong and powerful in his hunger to be free.

On his first attempt at escape, Cue is apprehended and flogged. Cared for by Aunt Rachel's young granddaughter, Sukey, the boy is still restless for flight. Aunt Rachel tells him of the underground railroad,

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[6]Benet, "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing," <u>Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benet</u> (New York, 1942), II, pp. 46-59.

and his vision of it is confirmed when a white traveling salesman, on his way through the community, drops a secret message to the boy.

Later, meeting the white man in the woods, Cue finds his way to a nearby river boat which is sailing with a load of slaves destined for the North and freedom. Overloaded, the boat has only limited space, and Cue insists that Sukey take his place. To distract the searching party which has been dispatched to locate the runaway slaves, Cue gains their attention and allows them to pursue him through the woods.

When he returns to Aunt Rachel's, the boy has a bullet wound and a disconsolate spirit. Freedom seems to him an increasingly "...heavy burden...and I wish I was shut of it. I never asked to take no such burden. But freedom's a hard-bought thing."[7] Inspired by the old woman, the boy does not give up his attempt to escape. When, as punishment for his attempted escape, he is sold by his master, Cue knows even more fully what it is to be a slave.

Burning with indignation, the boy finally frees himself and starts the long hazardous trek to the North. Along theway he is helped by friendly white sympathizers who feed him and clothe him and hide him in the night. When he reaches free territory, the boy shrinks from the first white man he meets; when the man pays no attention to him, Cue understands for the first time the new world in which he lives.

To complete his new life, he sees Sukey, who now appears to be a different person, as she walks "...free down the street."[8]

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[7]Ibid., p. 55.

[8]Ibid., p. 59.

The author's theme in this story of a young slave's escape from bondage is made clear in the youth's own dramatic words which comprise the title. The longing of Cue, the young negro slave, for freedom, brings him, almost before his time, to manhood. Yet until men yearn to be free, Benet holds, they do not meet the responsibilities of their human heritage.

In Cue there had been an awkward burning for liberty and independence, even, at an early age. That the boy was frightened by his strange drive is not surprising; having relied on his master for purpose and direction in life, the young slave trembled as he faced his new responsibility. The obligations of freedom, he had learned, are to more than oneself, and Cue's awakening to this was the moment of his first sacrifice in the independent adult world: When his young friend Sukey had been in danger of being left behind to her life of captivity, the boy surrendered his opportunity to board the river boat which would have sent him North.

Cue's quest for a free life had been stimulated by Aunt Rachel's aging wisdom. Old and knowing, the ancient slave woman saw in the boy not only a hot desire for freedom, but, more importantly, a growing sense of responsibility to the free principle. To be free, Cue had learned, was to be a man; and to be a man was sometimes a very lonely and difficult thing.

"The Die-Hard"[9]

The indictment of hatred feeding upon itself, and the exposure of

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[9]Benet, "The Die-Hard," Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1942), II, pp. 74-90.

the resultant barrier to personal or community growth, serves as Benet's theme is this story.

In the late nineteenth century, Jimmy Williams grows up in the small town of Shady, Georgia, where he is mystified by the old home of retired Confederate Colonel Cappalow. The village looks with wonder on the old man's home, and it is rumored that Old Man Cappalow hides an ancient treasure in his withering house. When the boy is apprehended spying on the estate by the colonel's Negro servant, he is invited to join the old man inside the house. Greeted by the elderly colonel, the young lad is plied with stories of the Civil War, and he finds the house suspended in time around the year 1860. Unwilling to accept the South's defeat in the War between the States, the colonel fills his study with Richmond newspapers thirty-five and forty years old. The ancient clock in the Confederate soldier's house has stopped; a chess game--unfinished--stands abandoned on the table; and antique pistols with long barrels line the walls. Jimmy accepts the colonel's invitation to join him in a small drink of wine--"To the Confederate States of America and damnation to all her enemies!"[10]

The boy harbors the secret of his subsequent visits to the Cappalow home and views his contact with the old man and his quiet Negro servant as a romantic adventure come to life. Finally, when the colonel attempts to involve the boy in a plot to assassinate the local postmaster (because he is a Republican) and encourages him to hate the small town's several Yankee residents, the youngster grows unhappy and perplexed. After awhile the boy is unable to distinguish between the world in which he

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[10]Ibid., p. 80.

lives and the strange, unchanging universe of Colonel Cappalow. Happy to accept his commission as a captain in the New Confederate Army, Jimmy promises to use the pistol and bullets the Colonel has given him in the event Cappalow has difficulty in the post office assassination.

Discovered while loading his pistol by his father, the local doctor and coroner, Jimmy reveals the assassination plot. When Dr. Williams rushes to call upon the colonel, the Negro servant attempts unsuccessfully to block his entrance. Accusing the doctor and his son of being traitors, the angry colonel is confounded by the visit of his young protégé's father, who tells Cappalow:

"This is 1897. sir, not 1860...damn your soul!...I was with the Ninth Georgia; I went through three campaigns...We didn't own niggers or plantations--the men I fought with. But when it was over, we reckoned it was over, and we'd build up the land. Well, we've had a hard time to do it, but we're hoeing corn. We've got something better to do than fill up a boy with a lot of magnolious notions and aim to shoot up a postmaster because there's Republican President..."[11]

Repeating his accusation, the old man collapses in a fit of anger and dies. Later the Negro servant discloses a "millyum dollars"[12] in Confederate money which the colonel has hoarded. He promises to accompany the body of the colonel to his original estate in Virginia, where by law, he is intitled to burial. That night Dr. Williams explains the fury of preserved hatred to his son, and the danger it can be to a person's--or a nation's--growth.

In his failure to accept the reality of defeat, Colonel Cappalow provides an important theme for the author's development. The hate and resentment of the old man is contrasted with the youngster's simple

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[11]Ibid., pp. 86-87.

[12]Ibid., p. 89.

innocence--an unformed personality, which, under supervision, may be shaped in the direction of good or evil. The psychopathic Confederate veteran had been so consumed by hatred that his existence depended upon its continuation and the extension of hate to any possible recipient.

Jimmy's father, also a Confederate veteran, was not without feeling for the South, but in his acceptance of defeat was a real maturity.

"I remember the smell of the burning woods in the Wilderness. And I remember Reconstruction. But...You can't go back to the past. And hate's the most expensive commodity in the world. It's never been anything else, and I've seen a lot of it. We've got to realize that--got too much of it, still, as a nation."[13]

In hate, and its corresponding absence of love, Benet recognizes the threat to man's progress, both as an individual and as a part of the larger social community, and develops this in the short story as his theme.

"Too Early Spring"[14]

The author's use of contemporary setting is exemplified in "Too Early Spring," which takes for its theme society's discrediting of innocence.

When sixteen-year old Charlie Peters meets Helen Sharon, he is finishing a long summer of physical activity which promises his fitness on the high school basketball court the following season. In the boy's world, his brother Kerry, a junior at the nearby state university, and his English teacher, Mr. Grant, hold a place almost as important as his parents.

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[13]Ibid., p. 90.

[14]Benet, "Too Early Spring," Tales Before Midnight (New York, 1939), pp. 186-204.

With Helen, Charlie establishes a youthful understanding, and the two begin to see each other often. Popular with their classmates, both are good students; Charlie excels at basketball. As their relationship develops, the boy learns that Helen's parents maintain an unhappy marriage, which they try to conceal in the presence of the two children. He learns too that his mother is distressed at his interest in young Helen. Mrs. Sharon, for a reason which the boy is unable to discern, is not liked by his mother.

In their young and innocent love, the two adolescents find an understanding of each other and a sense of exploration denied them from the larger adult world. Together they plan in an imaginary way, their future life, which they hope will mean marriage, children, and a home.

After a particularly triumphant evening on the basketball court, Charlie attends a party given for the high school's adult athletic followers by Mr. Grant. As the school's basketball star, the boy is the only young person in attendance and soon leaves the affair. Returning to his home, he finds it deserted by his parents, who are enjoying a party at the country club. At eleven p. m., Charlie cannot resist the temptation to talk to Helen. Uncertainly, he wanders by her house, whistling at her window, finally greeting his high school sweetheart in her bathrobe and slippers. Helen prepares cookies and milk for them in the otherwise empty Sharon house, her parents also having attended the country club function. Stretched before the open fireplace, the two are lost in the rapture of their future. When he sees her asleep, Charlie puts his arm around the girl protectively, planning to wake her right away. It is, however, he who is first awakened--by Mr. and Mrs. Sharon's late appearance and the woman's exclamation in the night.

Mrs. Sharon was saying, "Oh, Helen--I trusted you..." and looking as if she were going to faint. And Mr. Sharon looked at her for a minute and his face was horrible and he said, "Bred in the bone," and she looked as if he'd hit her.[15]

At once the two young people are separated and Charlie's parents are hurt and upset by the "scandal." While they do not hold their son responsible for the incident which has become a topic of community gossip, they regard Helen with contempt. ("They're for me because I'm their son. But they don't understand."[16]) In his older brother's reaction, the boy detects a new respect.

When he visits his English teacher, Mr. Grant, the boy appreciates the man's understanding. "'It's civilization,' he said. 'And all civilization's against nature. But I suppose we've got to have it. Only sometimes it isn't easy.'"[17]

Charlie plans to spend the following summer on a ranch in Colorado and to go east to college in the fall. He is disturbed when he hears that Helen's family is sending her to a convent.

Maybe they'll let me see her before she goes. But, if we do, it will be all wrong and in front of people and everybody pretending. I sort of wish they don't--though I want to, terribly. When her mother took her upstairs that night--she wasn't the same Helen. She looked at me as if she was afraid of me. And, no matter what they do for us now, they can't fix that.[18]

The destruction of innocence by a society which has in its own wickedness grown overly suspicious of others is the theme of "Too Early Spring." An innocent in the world of cynical adult behavior and sus-

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[15] Ibid., p. 202.

[16] Ibid., p. 203.

[17] Ibid., pp. 203-204.

[18] Ibid., p. 204.

picion, Charlie Peters did not understand the destruction of beauty in his life by those who had represented themselves as his moral overseers.

The reaction of the Peters family to the sexual intimacy their son and the young girl were accused of was a natural one. They condemned Helen for her behavior, while seeing their own offspring as guiltless in the event; the girl's parents also react harshly to their daughter--condemning her readily for her conduct while offering her no opportunity for defense.

It is doubtful that either family was as concerned about the real relationship of the two children as about appearances. In the cynical adult world of the story, circumstantial evidence was tantamount to proof, and the search for actual proof was not necessary: the conviction had been made upon appearance, the mainstay of a false social order.

In their youth and naivete, Charlie and Helen could not rise above those who had violated their love. Even though she knew the facts of the evening, Helen left the boy with the feeling that he had betrayed her. She had been forced to accept the higher judgment of her parents and the adult group they represented, and although in reality she knew she was innocent, she joined them in their shame.

For Charlie, the most unpleasant outgrowth of the evening, aside from his loss of Helen, had been the reaction of his parents to the girl and the new view of him held by his brother. In his brother's new attitude, he sensed a secret admiration, which, while not fully understood, made him vaguely uncomfortable; for he was aware that whatever his brother's reasons were, they were somehow not in keeping with his own social values.

The loss of Helen seemed to Charlie the greatest he had ever endured. But as he recounted the experience, he realized that the loss which gnawed most at him was the loss of an intangible something he could never regain.

"The Prodigal Children"[19]

The misunderstanding between generations and their inability to enlighten and aid each other in a clearer knowledge of the world about them, is Benet's theme in "The Prodigal Children."

Harry Crandall, a civilian propagandist in the early stages of World War II, joins his old companions in entertaining the twenty-year-old daughter of their mutual friends, Howdy and Ella Martinson. The red-haired girl is accompanied by a young navy ensign whom she exposes to the middle-aged group of intellectuals, all friends of her divorced parents. Actors, writers, stage designers, and members of the entire artistic community, these men and women of her parents' generation seem to the girl responsible for the world which has robbed her generation of its security. After taking the young naval officer to his train, the girl returns to a small cocktail party at her hosts' home, where, sensing her despondency, Crandall offers to mix her a drink. Looking around the room, the girl sees her parents' friends:

They looked harmless enough and she had been fond of them all. But they were the generation that had made the trouble, and you couldn't forget about that. They had got the world in a mess, and it was her generation and Tom's that would have to straighten it out...They had shouted for peace and disarmament, they had shouted of the horrors of war, then they

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[19]Benet, "The Prodigal Children," The Last Circle: Stories, and Poems by Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1946), pp. 191-206.

had turndd around and shouted for war. They drank too much, they divorced too easily, they lived by a code of their own; there was no health in them.[20]

In contrast, the girl has until this evening found Tom safe and secure, sound in his judgment of life. After his encounter with the people of her parents' world, something, she feels, has left their relationship. They "...made him look dull and ordinary...[21]

When the daughter of his close friends blames him for writing wartime propaganda, Harry Crandall admits his participation:

"...I'm everything you think. I'm a nasty little civilian propagandist, and will the new crowd make hay of that, in ten years' time, when it's all over! Remember the fearsome tripe the established names--or most of them--wrote about the last one, and how it retched the bowels of my generation? Well, they'll retch at me just the same way. But somebody had to do it."[22]

Earlier, they had been prepared to make a new world, Harry Crandall, and the girl's parents, and the members of their generation--

"And it wasn't a bad one. It had freedom and pleasure and good food and truthful art. But we had to make our own rules and we couldn't see around the next curve. So that's that, and what happened happened."[23]

After she is feeling better, Harry Crandall accompanies the girl outdoors for fresh air. Knowing that her generation, like the one which preceded it, will measure up to the task ahead, he leaves her there "...a tall, confident figure beneath the calm sky that sometime might hold the planes."[24]

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[20]Ibid., pp. 194-195.

[21]Ibid., p. 203.

[22]Ibid., p. 205.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., p. 206.

In "The Prodigal Children," Stephen Vincent Benet marks sharply the separation of generations, using their inability to communicate as his theme. Before the twenty-year-old girl, Harry Crandall saw a life much more complicated then she anticipated; but he saw, as well, a firm dedication to the job of saving--and later rebuilding--the world. He saw also the comfort--at times even the security--which comes from the knowledge that one has--with his fellows--done the best he can do. As the middle-aged man realized,

"...I've chosen the friends I must live and die beside. And we're getting on, everyone of us, but we've got about one more kick in us, and those that are left are tough."[25]

The real discoveries of the Martinson girl's generation, Crandall had known, were still ahead of it. That the youngsters of that generation might someday be held responsible for the world their children inherited, and that they might be powerless to justify that world, was something the writer knew but the girl did not. In their impatience for a better life, the younger generation, Crandall realized, frequently blamed the older--often, though not always, with cause.

The girl's hunger for security and a return to the simple values contrasted in Crandall's mind with his generation's less secure search for meaning in life. He regarded the young girl's quest as a natural outgrowth of the life which had been forced upon her by her parents and their friends.

Each generation, while viewing the other with suspicion, he decided, must stake its claim on the world it hoped to make--even if it would be forever misunderstood by the generation to which it gave birth.

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[25]Ibid.

In these five stories of Stephen Vincent Benet, the writer's interest in America emerges with growing clarity. While several of the themes of the selected stories are here introduced to this study, the others appear to be extensions of themes previously analyzed in Chapter II. Man's conquest of evil in "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and, conversely, the decay of human love in "The Die-Hard" are themes which have not been directly encountered in the author's novels. The separation of generations in "Too Early Spring" and "The Prodigal Children," and youth's discovery of its responsibility to liberty in "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing" are, however, variations of themes observed earlier.

In the concluding chapter of this study an effort will be made to integrate Benet's most prevalent concerns in theme, and to examine the characteristics which appear recurrently throughout his fiction.

## CHAPTER IV

## SIGNIFICANCE OF BENET'S USE OF THEME IN HIS FICTION

From the novels and short stories of Stephen Vincent Benet a number of themes emerge. The most apparent of these as represented in the author's novels and the five short stories examined will be called the major themes. These themes appear to reflect a conscious intent on the part of the author, a planned acknowledgement of concern for the areas in which they lie. They suggest Benet's awareness of a problem or of a national or individual characteristic. In each of the works in which these themes occur, they are an overt part of the fictional structure, without which the same novel or short story could not exist.

Below the level of action, however, there appear to be several consistencies which make themselves apparent in retrospect only. The action of thework--or even the philosophic outcome--does not always depend for its existence on theme; indeed, one may speculate that while these subthemes exist in the larger body of Benet's work, none exists so clearly in any single work that it could qualify as an important theme. The appearance of these recurring characteristics might well be a result of the author's attitude toward life rather than any attempt of his to convey that attitude. Though they may not be of less concern to the student of American literature, these underlying currents will be called minor themes for their elusiveness and their resistance to full explanation.

## Major Themes

In the fiction of the author four major themes repeat throughout. They are: (1) romantic love and society's effect on it; (2) the separation of generations and their corresponding failure to establish communication; (3) a hatred of oppression and a concern for the underprivileged; and (4) a championing of America as a haven of human freedom.

Society's role in determining an individual's success in love is measured carefully by Stephen Vincent Benet in four of his five novels and one of his most powerful short stories. Dealing with the theme of love in its many aspects, the author examines the love of a young college man for a lower-middle class town girl in The Beginning of Wisdom; the separate loves of a group of socially-indoctrinated young people in Young People's Pride; and the innocent love of adolescence, which meets its destruction, in "Too Early Spring." Illicit love--like that of Mr. Piper and Mrs. Severance in Young People's Pride--is restricted to those who, like Jean Huguenot in her rapture with Hugues Parette, have passed the earliest flush of youth with its attendant disappointment.

Gareth Grant, in love with the daughter of James Shore, knew he could not possess her, for the girl's real surrender had been made long before they met, in her acceptance of family strength and responsibility. Knowing this, he was still haunted by her, unaware that the eventual physical consummation of their love would yield so small a satisfaction for them both. Pledged to the continuation of the Shore heritage, Violet abandoned her personal life, and the part in it which true love played, to rule a world which she discovered, too late, was already beginning to show signs of decay.

In the love of Jean Huguenot for Hugues Parette there was a sense of latent fulfillment. After many years of marriage to a cautious history professor whose self-concern had prevented his real union with the girl, Jean became an easy mark for the carefree Frenchman. The gradual destruction of their love came as a surprise to Parette's American mistress, who had not been prepared to see her lover's slow disintegration under the pressures of war and world cruelty--a spiritual decay which culminated in unfaithfulness, just before his death. Chance, which had governed her life so unpredictably, had awarded Jean a brief period of happiness but had, in the end, marred even that short reprieve.

In _Young People's Pride_, the love of a middle-aged married man for a mature single woman is more successful because the participants had, in their maturity, learned to expect very little from life. Although their clandestine relationship constantly risked detection, they welcomed the fragment love had conferred upon them, with all its accompanying threats. Far less than satisfactory, their illegitimate love was at least something in a world which otherwise held nothing.

In the author's survey of youthful love, society plays a separate role. The combined ingredients of innocence and young rapture appear, in the end, to die as a result of society's false view of them. While the individual romances may continue--and may, indeed, be legalized in marriage--the external world manages through its participation to corrupt the values of the romantic partners, to alert them to dangers where none exist, and to destroy in their relationship the magic which is youth's greatest strength.

In his love for a young New Haven town girl, Philip Sellaby had made the initial discovery of his college years. Milly Stillman brought

to their relationship a wondrous freshness and charm, acquired from her basically simple background. Uncomplicated by worldly pursuit or intellectual concern, the girl approached each new experience with the candor and novelty of childhood. Knowing her, the boy came alive to experience, and his decision to marry the girl represented his desire to arrest those fleeting qualities of youth and wonder. That he had, much earlier, grown beyond Milly, was a fact the boy refused to admit. The physical death of the young girl saved the couple from the prospect of a growing intellectual incompatibility which might well have hastened the end of their earthly marriage.

Young people are frequently endangered by their elders in Benet's fiction. Indeed, the pride of young people--inherited from the adult world they are preparing to enter--is the theme of the author's second novel. The circumstances which, until late in the book, prevent the marriage of the two young couples, are a direct outgrowth of a society which places undue emphasis on superficialities. Nancy Ellicott had forced Oliver Crowe to delay their marriage until he could reveal clearer evidence of his ability to support her. In the end, the girl had compromised her earlier demands and the two had married, despite their somewhat tentative financial security. After their marriage, the couple regretted the earlier postponement, and viewed adherence to group values as a threat to happiness.

In the same novel, Elinor Piper had difficulty accepting Ted Billett's promiscuity during his wartime service abroad. Inherent in her reticence to accept the young man in marriage was her faith in an absolute moral standard which she had learned from an adult society. Her agreement to marry Ted had been born of a knowledge higher than convention--the reali-

zation that the boy's past could not be altered to fit an existing framework of right and wrong. In their union, the couple's maturity had increased as they had grown to better understand the limitations of many conventional moral decrees.

In "Too Early Spring," adolescent Charlie Peters and Helen Sharon were jolted from their innocence by a society which was more concerned with appearance than reality. Discovered by the girl's parents in what appeared to be a sexually-compromising situation, the love of the two young people was shattered profanely by the adult community in a way which the children could not understand. In their naivete, the youngsters believed moral guilt to be decided by real acts rather than outward appearances of those acts, but their condemnation by the society in which they lived was of such magnitude that the youngsters soon found themselves accepting the fact of their own guilt.

In another, not-unrelated theme, Stephen Vincent Benet explores the separation of generations, their distance from a central understanding of each other, and their difficulty in communicating.

In The Beginning of Wisdom, Philip Sellaby, Jr., changed many of his convictions during the four years he spent at Yale and the lone year he spent among the laborers in Arizona. Expecting a continuing loyalty to family values, Phil's father had made no attempt to understand his son's changing intellectual allegiances, instead despairing of the boy's new ideas, which Philip, Sr., considered foolish and--potentially--even dangerous. When the boy's association with the laborers of the Arizona mining camp had been made public, his father was embarrassed. Confident that the older man would agree with his position on the labor dispute, young Phil had tried to communicate with his father without success. When

the young man left his family home, he realized that the time of complete understanding between his and his father had passed, and that their failure at communication was a condition of their separate identities as human beings--a condition which had to be met and lived with.

Born to a prosperous New York trader, Andrew Beard was aware of the family breach his dedication to the Revolutionary cause would bring about. Because his older brother had already grieved his father by aligning himself with the Revolutionaries, the younger boy had considered his choice of a side in the colonial political dissension with great care. When he elected to fight for America's independence from British rule, Andrew realized that his decision would distress his father. Despite the lack of understanding which would greet his choice, Andrew knew he had done the only thing he could do.

In a more recent setting, Stephen Vincent Benet focuses on the generation which grew to maturity during World War II. "The Prodigal Children" were to the twenty-year-old girl in the story the generation responsible for the world's violent status in the 1940's. Too young to know the extent of human limitation, the Martinson girl had indicted all the people of her parents' group for the easy living and the departure from traditional values which she believed to have caused the international difficulties. When her older friend tried to defend his contemporaries, he found the girl's youthful impatience and her corresponding lack of experience with life impenetrable barriers to understanding. Knowing this, he continued to state his defense, certain that his young friend would someday understand human failure.[1]

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[1]For an extension of this theme, consult "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing." Although the young slave-boy was an orphan by the time he had reached his decision to try for freedom and independence, he was aware that his course differed radically from that of his father, who did not consider slavery a great imposition.

Probably no American writer has evidenced a clearer hatred of tyranny and oppression than Stephen Vincent Benet. This, together with a warm concern for the underprivileged, is a strong and resurgent theme in his fiction.

Oppression of any type must submit itself to Benet's scrutiny--the slave and master relationship, as in "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing;" the persecution of the mine laborers in The Beginning of Wisdom; the exploitation of the indentured workers on the indigo plantation in Spanish Bayonet; even the domination of men's souls by the devil--perhaps the worst of all tyrannies--in "The Devil and Daniel Webster."

Philip Sellaby's awakening to the persecution of the immigrant laborers with whom he had worked in Arizona is similar to Andrew Beard's discovery--more than a hundred years earlier--of the working conditions at Dr. Gentian's indigo farm. In the century and a half which followed the American Revolution, however, significant changes occurred. The Arizona International Workers of the World, while not enjoying national (or even local) sympathy, had been guaranteed traditional American immunity from persecution. It was when this immunity had been violated that he saw the danger of mob-rule, and the extent to which an uninformed people could be inflamed by a dictator and made to act at his command.

Life on the old south plantation for Cue, the young slave, was comparable to the life Andrew Beard's Minorcan friends were forced to endure in the Florida wilderness, and both the Minorcans and the small Negro boy achieved a certain quiet dignity in their refusal to compromise their lust for freedom, and their ability to survive their master's treatment.

Oppression of another kind is described in "The Devil and Daniel

Webster." Jabez Stone's trade with the devil had subjected the old farmer to a tyranny of the soul, a life which would see him in Satan's perpetual debt. Not one to sanction such personal oppression, the famous New England orator came readily to the farmer's defense, gaining a hard-fought acquittal for his defendant. Without freedom, Daniel Webster assured the jury, the best of life becomes meaningless.[2] Personal bondage may be the result of corrupt institutions, or it may emerge from individual weakness in the face of temptation--both triumphs for human enslavement.

In his fiction, as in all his writing, Benet demonstrates an absorbing interest in the American scene. Interestingly, the work of the author which might be termed regional because of its setting in a special locale, appears in a broader sense to be national in character. Through his use of local color, Benet often extends the range of his subject matterjto specific events in certain regions at clearly isolated periods in history; in doing so, however, he relates each fragment to the American cultural heritage, thus accounting for its existence in the larger terms of history.

In Jean Huguenot qnd in "The Die-Hard," the author turned his attention to the post-civil war South--finding it a land of recovery, though long in its memory of Northern destruction. In Jimmy Williams' father, Benet captured the spirit of the intelligent southerner around the turn of the century--dedicated to the peaceful rebuilding of his land, but unable to forget, entirely, the many changes war had brought

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[2] Stephen Vincent Benet, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1942), II, p. 42.

to it.

In Jean Huguenot's circle of friends, the war had not been so successfully abandoned as a topic of continuing interest, and much bitterness remained. The girl's interest in the event, however, was small, and this was one of her earliest distinguishing characteristics. Not bound to any loyalty more absolute than her wild dedication to beauty and experience, Jean had a far greater potential as a human being. She was receptive to life in whatever area it might be found, and it was this particular endowment which lent her a universal charm and understanding.

Possibly the most impressive of Benet's works on the American arena is his characterization of James Shore--one of the first American businessmen to be irresistibly impelled by energy, strength, and a restless desire to do big things. It was men like these, the author holds, who made the giant investment of their whole selves in the American landscape, and to whom the rest of us must offer our gratitude. Without James Shore and others like him, America would have found progress a difficult commodity to secure.

Even whose who were traitors to the American cause receive Benet's attention in "The Devil and Daniel Webster." A nation--like a people--is formed from all its representative parts, and the sinister jurists of the story "...had all played a part in America."[3] In the complex American nation, evil, too, has often unintentionally, worked for progress.

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[3]Ibid., p. 40.

Minor Themes

Through the fiction of Stephen Vincent Benet, two steady currents make themselves felt: (1) the strength of the author's heroines, and (2) the author's great admiration for the individual who meets life passionately and without fear.

The novels and short stories of Benet are peopled with women who move through their worlds in possession of great strength. Probably the strongest of the writer's fictional heroines is Violet Shore, inheritor of her father's hard determination, who permitted herself no allowance for failure. Unrelenting in her drive to continue the Shore power, Violet succeeded in the task she had undertaken--surrendering her own happiness in the pursuit.

Jean Huguenot, often the victim of unkind chance, managed after each defeat to rise and rebuild again from the broken pieces of her life. After her French lover's death in battle and the later disclosure of his infidelity, the girl despaired and turned to prostitution. In the midst of her decadent life, however, there was a fiber of strength still so tough that it enabled her to leave her sordid circumstances. At the end of the novel, the girl wasin possession of her late lover's child, born to another woman; with mature vision and a genuine love for the boy, Jean dedicated herself to the construction of his life, forsaking the experiences of her past.

Young Milly Stillman had the strength of youth, and it was this that Philip Sellaby so admired in the gay Irish girl. What she lacked in background and education she had compensated for in her hearty approach to life. After the night the two had spent together, Phil was harrassed by

the conventional misgivings of conscience, but Milly, who had surrendered her virginity, was not. Envisioning the possibility of the occurrence, the girl had much earlier made her decision in favor of the evening's outcome, and was, therefore, left with no regrets.

In his novels, Benet's heroines are frequently stronger than their male counterparts, and it is often this very strength the men pursue.

In addition to the American writer's respect for the strong feminine characters of his fiction, there is another type to which he is dedicated. The human being who meets life aggressively and with a passionate will to live, receives Benet's warmest admiration. While the most striking example of this characteristic is found in sensitive Jean Huguenot, few of the author's stories and poems exist without at least one individual whose spirit and courage exceeds the normal human limits.

One of the qualities which set Phil Sellaby apart from his classmates was the hunger for experience and discovery which eventually led him to Milly Stillman. In Milly, Phil met the first person he had known whose lust for experience was greater than his own. Unafraid, the two married in opposition to the boy's family and existing college policy. After the girl's death, Phil again found himself defying popular opinion in his allegiance to the Arizona copper miners. The boy, like Daniel Webster in Benet's later story, stood for what he believed to be right, and lived his life as he chose--adventurously and with a strong sense of his convictions.

Slave-boy Cue, in his imprisonment, so loved life that he risked a hazardous escape to the North to live in a free state. The impulse to find a life in which love and beauty were present persuaded Jean Huguenot to surrender reputation and social position in her flight to Paris

with Hugues Parette.

In all the claims he made to the younger girl in defense of "The Prodigal Children," Harry Crandall's proudest assertion in behalf of his generation may have seemed to her his least meaningful: "Born and bred in the brier patch, and now we're back there again. But we did take life with both hands; we weren't cautious about it. And that's still something to do."[4]

Fifty years before this meeting of the two generations, James Shore and his kind had also met life vigorously, and without them--for all their recklessness--the American land could not have been the same. And for Benet, this would have been a great disappointment, indeed.

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[4]Benet, "The Prodigal Children," The Last Circle: Stories and Poems by Stephen Vincent Benet (New York, 1946), p. 206.

# CONCLUSION

In both the novel and the short story form, Stephen Vincent Benet's writing rings with important theme. The consistency of Benet's concern for certain problems, as shown earlier in this chapter, indicates a sensitivity on the part of the writer to these several areas. Unlike the novelist or short story writer whose theme is a by-product of the story he tells, Benet appears to have written with theme as his major concern. Perhaps as a result of this, characterization and careful plotting are sometimes sacrificed to theme.

It is possible to observe in a chronological survey of Benet's fiction a steady maturity in his choice of theme. In his earliest work, the author writes of the difficulties of young people--their disappointments in love, their acknowledgment of social responsibility, and their unsuccessful attempt to make themselves understood by their elders. Although Benet's final novel was written at an age when many authors are writing their first, James Shore's Daughter indicates a growth to a very real understanding of the world. As opposed to Benet's interest in adolescence and young adulthood in his earlier work, the larger theme of his final novel suggests Benet's growth as an artist. This panorama of American and European culture was the author's last novel. Benet, who invested his later creative energy in poetry and the short story, indicated his increasing dissatisfaction with the novel form, and it is possible that he would not have produced a sixth novel in late maturity, had he lived to choose.

In his choice of theme, Stephen Vincent Benet revealed his concern for those problems which are universal: preserving freedom, meeting life fully and with zest, understanding one's world and one's fellow man, and learning to discover beauty in the joy and sadness that comprise daily living.

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